

Written Statement by European Disability Forum

Statement prepared for the 74th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe, 29–31 October 2024, Copenhagen.

Call for Disability Inclusion in WHO Europe's Preparedness Strategy and Action

As we approach the [3rd Global Disability Summit](#) (GDS) in 2025, it is crucial to ensure that all frameworks developed by WHO Europe are fully inclusive of persons with disabilities. These frameworks must be aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which **has been ratified by nearly all countries in the wider European region, including the European Union (EU)**. The only exception is **Tajikistan**, which has signed but not yet ratified the convention. This widespread ratification reflects a strong regional commitment to upholding the rights of persons with disabilities.

The [European Disability Forum](#) (EDF) calls for urgent action to address the gaps in current strategies, particularly concerning health emergency preparedness, response, and resilience in the WHO European Region.

The Urgent Need for Inclusive Frameworks

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately 135 million persons with disabilities reside within the Europe and Central Asia Region (ECAR). In recent years, this population has faced heightened challenges due to an array of global crises, including:

- The COVID-19 pandemic and its lasting effects on healthcare and social services.
- The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, exacerbating the refugee crisis, with persons with disabilities disproportionately affected.
- The growing impact of climate change, increasing the frequency of disasters and displacement.
- Complex migration patterns across Europe, which often leave persons with disabilities neglected.
- The global economic crisis, which disproportionately impacts persons with disabilities.

These converging challenges underscore the need for health and social policies that include persons with disabilities, especially in times of crisis.

Agenda Item: Health Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Resilience (2024-2029) of the 74th Regional Committee

Regarding the "Health emergency preparedness, response, and resilience in the WHO European Region 2024–2029: a new regional strategy and action plan (Preparedness 2.0)," EDF notes with concern that **persons with disabilities have not been explicitly mentioned in the current strategy and action plan.**

It is imperative that WHO Europe and its Member States take immediate steps to ensure that all emergency preparedness and response plans are inclusive of persons with disabilities. This includes developing specific protocols to protect and support persons with disabilities during disasters and public health crises, including those related to climate change, armed conflicts, pandemics, and other humanitarian crises. Persons with disabilities must also be meaningfully involved in the development of these plans. Without this inclusion, millions of individuals will remain at increased risk of marginalisation in critical moments.

Key Recommendations for WHO Europe Ahead of GDS 2025

In preparation for the Global Disability Summit in 2025, EDF urges WHO Europe and its Member States to make [concrete and innovative commitments](#) towards disability inclusion by focusing on the following priorities:

1. Mainstream disability inclusion in health and humanitarian frameworks

WHO Europe must ensure that a rights-based, disability-inclusive approach is fully integrated into all health emergency preparedness, response, and resilience frameworks. This includes embedding disability considerations at every stage of policy and program development, from planning and design to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Specifically, this should cover areas such as:

- Health systems strengthening
- Emergency response protocols
- Disaster risk reduction strategies
- Economic recovery efforts

All strategies should account for the unique challenges faced by persons with disabilities to ensure their protection and access to services during times of crisis.

2. Enhance accessibility in crisis response

Emergency protocols and humanitarian interventions must be fully accessible to persons with disabilities. This includes ensuring that:

- Early warning systems are accessible and can reach people with various disabilities.
- Evacuation processes, equipment and emergency shelters accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities.
- Healthcare services, including crisis-related medical care, are designed with accessibility in mind.

Tailored solutions should be created in partnership with organisations of persons with different disabilities, ensuring that no one is left behind during emergencies or humanitarian crises.

3. Promote local leadership and OPD participation

Strengthen the meaningful participation of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in decision-making processes at all levels—local, national, and regional. This is vital to ensure that disability-inclusive policies are developed based on the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. OPDs should be directly involved in:

- Training for local, regional and national offices on how to partner with and outreach to OPDs
- Planning and designing preparedness and humanitarian initiatives
- Implementing and monitoring programs to ensure they remain inclusive
- Contributing to policy reviews to ensure continuous improvement

This inclusion should extend to both urban and rural areas, recognising that disability experiences vary across different settings.

4. Adopt a multisectoral approach to disability inclusion

Collaboration between sectors is essential to address the interconnected challenges faced by persons with disabilities, particularly during emergencies. WHO Europe should:

- Foster partnerships between health, social protection, education, and labor sectors, among others.
- Ensure that disability is mainstreamed across all relevant sectors, especially in health emergency and disaster response systems.

By adopting a multisectoral approach, Member States can better coordinate resources and expertise to protect the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities.

5. Invest in data collection and evidence-based policy

Reliable data is critical for developing effective, disability-inclusive policies. WHO Europe and its Member States should:

- Invest in comprehensive data collection systems that track the specific needs and vulnerabilities of persons with disabilities in health emergencies and humanitarian contexts.
- Conduct research that informs evidence-based policies and interventions.
- Regularly monitor and evaluate the progress of disability-inclusive measures to ensure accountability and improvement.

The development of evidence-based policies will ensure that interventions are grounded in the real needs of persons with disabilities, leading to more effective and equitable outcomes.

Conclusion

In the lead-up to GDS 2025, WHO Europe and its Member States must take bold steps to ensure that persons with disabilities are not only included but prioritised within health emergency preparedness, response, and resilience efforts. By mainstreaming disability inclusion, enhancing accessibility, promoting local leadership, adopting a multisectoral approach, and relying on evidence-based policies, Member States can protect the rights of persons with disabilities and ensure they are adequately supported during future crises. EDF calls on WHO Europe and its Member States to work collaboratively with OPDs, ensuring that disability inclusion is not an afterthought, but a fundamental part of all future strategies and actions.